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NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

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Charles Pinckney

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Historic Site
South Carolina

When William L. Pierce of Georgia sat down in Philadelphia to assess his fellow delegates at what would become the Constitutional Convention of 1787, he saw Charles Pinckney as “a young Gentleman of the most promising talents...intimately acquainted with every species of polite learning” and possessing “a spirit of application and industry beyond most Men.” The youngest of the South Carolina delegates and long-time advocate of a strong central government, Pinckney had been among the first to call for a general convention to amend the ineffective Articles of Confederation by which the country had been governed since 1781. He attended every session, served on the committee that prepared the rules of procedure, and participated frequently and effectively in debates, speaking “with great neatness and perspicuity” and treating “every subject as fully...as it requires.” Of special note were his strong arguments for protecting property interests and establishing a central government with a clear separation of powers, a government that would represent the rights of the people. He is most widely remembered for his celebrated draft of a constitution, which, though never formally considered by the convention, contained 30 or more provisions that were incorporated into the final document. Although embroiled in controversy during his lifetime and overlooked by early historians after his death, modern historians have confirmed Charles Pinckney as a leader at the convention who helped resolve problems that arose during the debates and contributed significantly to the creation of the world’s oldest written national instrument of government..

A Life of Public Service

Charles Pinckney was born into a prominent Charleston, S.C., family on October 26, 1757. His father, a wealthy planter and attorney, was also commanding officer of the local militia, a member of the General Assembly, and, in 1775, president of the South Carolina Provincial Congress. The Pinckneys were part of Charleston's social elite.

Young Charles received his basic schooling from Dr. David Oliphant, a noted South Carolina scholar who emphasized history, the classics, political science, and languages. In 1773, when the growing unrest between Great Britain and the colonies disrupted Charles's plans to attend school in England, he stayed home and studied law with his father.

Charles's career of public service started in 1779 at age 21 in the midst of the American Revolution. After joining the South Carolina Bar, he represented Christ Church Parish in the General Assembly and, as a lieutenant in his father's militia regiment, took part in the abortive Franco-American attempt to retake Savannah, Ga., from the British.

When the British captured Charleston in the spring of 1780, Charles and his father were arrested and imprisoned along with other American officers. Charles remained confined until June 1781. His father, however, was freed after swearing allegiance to the British Crown, an action that saved the Pinckney estate, including Snee Farm, from confiscation.

In 1784, after serving briefly in the General Assembly, Charles Pinckney was selected as a delegate to Congress, then meeting in Trenton, N.J. In May 1787 he, his cousin Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, Pierce Butler, and John Rutledge represented South Carolina at the Constitutional Convention meeting in Philadelphia to address the weaknesses in the Articles of Confederation. Charles Pinckney took an active part in the debates and subsequently labored diligently for South Carolina to ratify the new Constitution, which it did on May 23, 1788.

In April 1788 Pinckney married Mary Eleanor Laurens, with whom he would have three children. Over the next 10 years he held a variety of political offices, including president of the South Carolina State Constitutional Convention (1790), governor of South Carolina (1789-91, 1791-92, and 1796-98), and U.S. Senator (1798-1801).

During the nation's formative years, the Pinckneys were supporters of the Federalist Party. By 1795, however, Charles had come to view the Federalists as the party of the rich and well-born and he joined Thomas Jefferson's newly formed Democratic-Republican Party, championing the interests of rural Americans over those of the tidewater aristocracy. During the Presidential campaign of 1800, Pinckney was Jefferson's South Carolina campaign manager and helped him win the election. As a reward, Jefferson appointed him Ambassador to Spain, a post he held from 1801-05. During that time, he helped to facilitate the transfer of Louisiana from France and made a valiant but unsuccessful effort to get Spain to cede Florida to the United States.

Pinckney returned to South Carolina in January 1806 and served briefly in the General Assembly before being elected to his fourth and final term as governor (1806-08). In 1818, after a final term in the legislature and a brief retirement from active political life, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, from which he retired in 1821. He spent his final years writing of his travels and political life. He died on October 29, 1824, at age 67, after more than 40 years of service to community, state, and nation. He is buried at St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Charleston.

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The cover portrait of Charles Pinckney was painted by Gilbert Stuart
c.1796.

Philipse Manor Hall State Historic Site. N.Y.

Coat of Arms

From "Signing of the Constitution" by Louis S. Glanzman
© Louis S. Glanzman

Charles Pinckney, signature of
National Park Service

Silver ink stand used by Pinckney and other delegates in signing the U.S.
Federal Constitution
National Park Service

Constitution
National Park Service

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About Snee Farm

"I must apologize for asking you to call at a place so indifferently furnished & where your fare will be entirely that of a farm."

Charles Pinckney to President George
Washington, May 1791

A Window to the Past

Snee Farm comprises 28 acres in Mount Pleasant, S.C., and constitutes only a small remnant of the property Charles Pinckney inherited from his father in 1782 (see map below). Most of Pinckney's papers were destroyed in the Charleston fire of 1861 and what we know about the family's years at Snee Farm has come mainly through the science of archeology. No standing structures remain from the Pinckney era. The present house, built of native cypress and pine in the 1820s, is a fine example of a tidewater cottage once common throughout the coastal areas of the Carolinas and Virginia. Archeologists have found that the house stands on the site of the Pinckney plantation house. They have also identified the location of ponds and fields used for growing indigo, rice, and cotton, the Pinckney well, the plantation kitchen, two slave cabins, and a slightly later (circa 1825) structure near the kitchen that possibly served as an overseer's house or servants' quarters. The kitchen and well areas disclosed a large collection of 18th- and early 19th-century artifacts, including Chinese porcelain and French and English tableware, along with more common ceramics and slave-made pottery called "Colonoware." Wine and liquor bottles, cutlery, British and American coins, and the remains of domestic and game animals that composed part of the residents' diet were also recovered.

So far more than 150,000 artifacts have been removed from the site. Additional research and archeological work, however, is still needed to thoroughly understand the role this lowcountry plantation played in shaping one of our nation's early leaders. As the work continues, newly discovered information will be incorporated into exhibits and programs at the site to keep visitors fully informed about Charles Pinckney, his family, and his land.

About Your Visit

Charles Pinckney National Historic Site is located at 1254 Long Point Road in Mount Pleasant, S.C., six miles north of Charleston off U.S. 17. It is open daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., except January 1, Thanksgiving Day, and December 25.

A visitor center contains exhibits on Charles Pinckney, his family, his political career, and his contributions to the U.S. Constitution. Additional exhibits examine the impact of slavery on the new nation and the archeological discoveries made onsite. Both the visitor center and the grounds are wheelchair-accessible.

For More Information

Charles Pinckney National Historic Site
1214 Middle Street
Sullivans Island, SC 29482-9748
843-881-5516
www.nps.gov/chpi

Charles Pinckney National Historic Site is one of more than 380 parks representing our nation's natural and cultural heritage. Visit www.nps.gov to learn more about parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities.

Other Points of Interest

Be sure to visit Charleston's other two National Park Service areas, Fort Moultrie and Fort Sumter National Monument. Both are within easy traveling distance of Charles Pinckney.

Fort Moultrie, located on Sullivan's Island, helped protect the sea approaches to Charleston from 1776 until the end of World War II. It was the site of the first decisive American victory over the British Navy during the Revolutionary War. It was also one of the forts from which Confederate artillerymen fired on Fort Sumter to begin the Civil War in 1861.

Fort Sumter stands on a man-made island at the entrance to Charleston Harbor just over a mile from Fort Moultrie. It is accessible only by boat. A National Park Service concessioner operates a tour boat service to the monument. There is a fee for the tour boat. Schedules are available at the Fort Sumter Visitor Education Center, 340 Concord Street, Charleston, S.C. Phone: 843-577-0242.

Historic Snee Farm

The land that became Snee Farm was originally part of a 1698 grant to Richard Butler. Charles Pinckney's father purchased the property in 1754 and developed it into a typical lowcountry plantation on which he raised cattle, indigo (until the American Revolution destroyed the market), rice, and a variety of foodstuffs. Later owners planted cotton, which by the 1840s replaced rice as the principal cash crop.

The Pinckney family owned Snee Farm for more than 60 years, until 1817, when it was sold to satisfy debts. It was not Charles Pinckney's primary residence (he had an elegant townhouse in Charleston where he lived most of the year), but it was known as his country estate and a favorite among his seven plantations. President George Washington ate breakfast here in May 1791 at Pinckney's invitation.

Snee Farm was a working plantation under a succession of owners until well into the 20th century. Most of its labor force were African Americans, first as slaves imported to plant and tend the rice and indigo fields, then as tenants or sharecroppers after the abolishment of slavery. The Pinckneys kept between 40 and 60 slaves at Snee Farm. Many were skilled artisans such as wheelwrights, coopers, sawyers, carpenters, and gardeners.

By the 1930s farming was no longer a source of income for Snee Farm's owner and much of the original plantation began to disappear as lands were sold off to developers. As a result of the growth of Charleston's suburbs, most of the original 715-acre Pinckney estate is now occupied by residential housing and a golf course.

In 1990 the Friends of Historic Snee Farm, a local preservation group, deeded 28 acres of land—the only undeveloped portion of the original 1754 Pinckney purchase—to the National Park Service to create a memorial to one of the drafters and signers of the Constitution of the United States.

Rice cultivation required much labor and agricultural expertise. Low country planters imported slaves with special rice-growing skills from certain regions of western Africa to local plantations, including Snee Farm. These Africans also knew the requirements of cotton and indigo production. Rice production played a major role in the economies of Charleston and the new nation.

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Uncultivated Indigo
National Park Service

Among the features unearthed by archeologists is an elaborate brick foundation of a structure from the Pinckney era. They have also found pottery remnants and personalized items such as wine bottle seals and a silver spoon bearing the initials of Charles Pinckney's parents.
National Park Service

Plantation House foundation, archaeology work in progress
National Park Service

Park Map
National Park Service/cartographics

Unloading a rice barge
The Charleston Museum, Charleston, SC